THE CONSCIENCE OF MACBETH

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

THE STRUCTURE OF MACBETH'S CONSCIENCE

Whatever are the other merits of Macbeth, it must be classed as one of the most penetrating studies of conscience in literature. Shakespeare does not attempt to describe in the drama how the ordinary criminal would react to evil, but how Shakespeare himself would have felt if he had fallen into crime.¹ The ramifications of this conflict between the conscience of a man of genius and the supernatural forces of wickedness, therefore, assume immense dimensions. "Macbeth leaves on most readers a profound impression of the misery of a guilty conscience and the retribution of crime . . . . But what Shakespeare perhaps felt even more deeply, when he wrote this play, was the incalculability of evil--that in meddling with it human beings do they know not what."² This drama displays an evil not to be accounted for simply in terms of the protagonist's will or his causal relationships to evil. It is an agency which is beyond the power of Macbeth's will; and his conscience, as powerful and imaginative as it is, can only warn him that he is involving himself in a force which


will cause him unexpected and hideous mental pain. If there is a moral in Macbeth, it is obviously that men should not tamper with evil, for not even a deep-rooted conscience and an ascendant will can contend with its influence.

Stoll suggests that Shakespeare removes from the play the historic reasons which Macbeth could plead for his assassination of Duncan. Duncan's government was a weak one, nor could his military ability compare favorably with that of his cousin. But more important is the fact that Macbeth makes no mention of the family murders Macbeth could have avenged. Duncan's ancestor, Malcolm II, was responsible for the death of the father of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It was not revenge which Shakespeare chose to treat, but the conscience of a man who, for no reason besides his ambition, plunges himself into blackest crime and deepest remorse. "Macbeth's conscience is one of the most impressive things about him. Over and over again it draws us to him and asks us to pity him. It asks us to see him as a man who knows the demands of goodness and decency, however much he refuses to meet those demands." 

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If Macbeth's mental agony is to be attributed to a conscience, the form of his moral structure needs to be established. The acute spiritual conflict which he experiences seems to have its basis in a set of moral values which are an integral part of his mental configuration. "Shakespeare has depicted his hero as a man of essentially noble character, brave, fearless, and honoured by all with whom he comes in contact. As a general, he is successful and trusted, as a man, beloved."⁶ There is evidence of Macbeth's loyalty to Duncan, for example, even before he is met in the play. The wounded sergeant who gives a battle report to the king explains a soldier's view of his general:

For brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name--
Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps.⁷

In the same scene Ross compares loyal Macbeth with the traitorous Cawdor, whose thaneship Duncan immediately gives to his faithful general. When Duncan personally thanks Macbeth for his service, the thane of Glamis replies:


The service and loyalty I owe,
In doing it, pays itself.
(I, iv, 22-23)

Malcolm, exiled in England, tells Macduff,

This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues,
Was once thought honest.

(IV, iii, 12-13)

"He was trusted, apparently, by everyone; Macduff, a man of
the highest integrity, 'loved him well.'" 8

Shakespeare takes pains to describe Macbeth as a man of
stature and the savior of his country. He has natural ties
with humanity and is repulsed at the thought of murder.
"Once the crime is committed, however, these feelings are
gradually destroyed, until at the end of the play he is a
symbol of unnatural man, cut off from his fellow men and from
God." 9 But despite the fact that he chooses a life of crime,
he does not develop an attitude which is wholly criminal.
"To the last his agonized utterances repeatedly emphasize his
exceptional sensitiveness, his awareness of his own wickedness,
and even his recognition of the enormity of the hideous wrongs
he inflicts on his victims." 10 He remains sensitive to his
evil and to the fact that he is a human and will suffer the
penalty of his wickedness, except when he seems to be deluded

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8Bradley, op. cit., p. 279.
by the advice of the witches into a false sense of security. Near the end of his life Macbeth expresses his innermost sensibility concerning the nature and value of moral virtue:

And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have.

(V, iii, 24-26)

"The account of Macbeth before he undertook the murder of his kinsman, his guest, and his king, the 'gracious Duncan,' is so brief and Macbeth's ambition leads him so quickly to such violent crime that we are apt to forget that he was originally a good man."\(^{11}\) Heaven strives constantly to remind Macbeth of his moral attitudes; and he is at least nominally Christian, if he is "mainly pagan in spirit and liable when strongly tempted, to become diabolic."\(^{12}\)

Although Macbeth seems to have entertained thoughts about assassination, he probably served bravely in the war out of loyalty to his country. It is possible, nevertheless, that he conducted himself valiantly on the battlefield for selfish reasons. Lady Macbeth's reaction to his letter seems to be evidence that they have discussed his aspirations to the throne anterior to the battle. An ordinary woman would not immediately think of urging her husband to murder her king had she not considered doing so before. Macbeth could

\(^{11}\) Hardin Craig, An Interpretation of Shakespeare (New York, 1948), p. 256.

have fought as he did, consequently, in an effort to establish himself as a military hero so that he would be in a better position to usurp the throne. Elliott believes that Macbeth has fully considered his desire to attain the throne, including the possibility of his murdering Duncan. As the witches prophesy, he apparently becomes excited about their references to the success of his mental desires. Perhaps the reason he starts at the prophecy of the weird sisters is that "because he already has murder in view, he immediately accepts his part of the prophecy as a kind of order that he must bring it about." But it is fully evident that Macbeth's mind is his own; for when the witches have told him all they can, they disappear, and his thoughts could become bubbles and air precisely as the prophets do. But "just because he had entertained those 'horrible imaginings' (I, iii, 138) so often, without rejecting them definitely, they coalesce not into one 'horrid image' (I, iii, 134 f), a 'suggestion' (temptation) almost overwhelmingly powerful."

Lady Macbeth had talked to her husband enough to know that in the past his moral character had blocked the path of his ambition. She fears that her aspiration for her husband will be thwarted by his nature:

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13Elliott, op. cit., p. 44.


15Elliott, op. cit., p. 48.
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst
Highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false.
(I, v, 18-22)

She realizes, however, that Macbeth is not a perfect saint; for she continues,

And yet wouldst wrongly win: thou’ldst have, great Glamis,
That which cries 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it;
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone.'
(I, v, 23-26)

If Macbeth did not possess some traces of the kindness and holiness his wife describes, he would not struggle with his temptation to assassinate Duncan as he does. He believes that he ought to be faithful to the double or triple trust Duncan has placed in him. Since Macbeth is Duncan's relative, subject, and host, he argues with himself that he should not bear the knife. Besides these objections to the murder, Duncan's recent kindness is a reminder that he would be acting contrary to human nature if he killed his king. Macbeth recognizes that the nature of his proposed crime carries a "deep damnation," and that

pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.
(I, vii, 21-25)
In their conversations concerning the murder of Duncan prior to the play, Lady Macbeth evidently urged her husband to "catch the nearest way," (I, v, 19) and he objected because of his morality. But when the witches mention their predictions, his imagination, which flashes his guilty thoughts before him, aids their temptation to get the throne as quickly as possible. *Macbeth* is not a play about a series of murders; it is a play about the suffering of a man "of deep convictions who was not a murderer at heart becoming not only a murderer but a butcherer all through his first mistake." But although he is not naturally inclined to murder, the crown so attracts his ambition that he feels that it is a lesser evil than failure to gain the crown.

Macbeth's arguments, however, convince him to abandon his plan to murder Duncan, until his wife stimulates new resolve in his only slightly cooled purpose. The reasons he gives her for changing his mind are probably rationalizations, for the idea that he should not soon cast away his new honors is a mask for the real reason for his alteration of plans—murder is a horrid deed and is accompanied by a severe punishment. "Macbeth saw the horror in advance and shrank from the action, yet let himself be enticed on into it" by reasons

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18 Goddard, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
which are not directly related to his reasons for not wanting to commit the murder. Lady Macbeth lists four reasons why she believes her husband should renew his determination to eliminate Duncan from his path of ambition: (1) to prove that he loves her (I, vii, 39), (2) to prove that he is not afraid (I, vii, 39-45), (3) to prove he has as much courage as she (I, vii, 56-58), (4) to keep his promise to murder Duncan (I, vii, 58-59). Macbeth wants to be convinced that he ought to eliminate the King, and the gall his wife pours into his mind is enough to curdle his milk of human kindness. Blackmore suggests that Macbeth wavers before the murder of Duncan not because of his conscience, but because of the vengeance which ultimately overtakes the criminal. It is finally her proposal of a practical plot and her "undaunted mettle" which convince Macbeth that he should renew his former resolve.

Johnson suggests that "the arguments by which Lady Macbeth persuades her husband to commit the murder, afford a proof of Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature. She urges the excellence and dignity of courage, a glittering idea which has dazzled mankind from age to age." She argues


that he must abide by the oath he has sworn, "another art of sophistry by which men have sometimes deluded their consciences and persuaded themselves that what would be criminal in others is virtuous in them."22 All of her reasons, in fact, are sophisms which could persuade no thinking man. "It is not by them, it is by personal appeals, through the admiration she extorts from him, and through sheer force of will, that she impels him to the deed."23

More basic than any of Macbeth's social or humane arguments against his murdering Duncan is his fear of eternity. To a man as ambitious as Macbeth is at the beginning of the action, premises based on family or government relationships would not seem as important as he makes them, if he could be positive that he would not be punished after death. Except for the problem of eternity, human nature might be altered to fit his desire. And the public honor which would accrue to him as king would certainly outshine the mere honor of receiving a new thaneship. It appears, then, that fear of the after-life is a foundational principle in Macbeth's conscience. He says at the beginning of Scene 7 of Act I,

*If the assassination*  
*Could trammel up the consequence, and catch*  
*With his surcease success; that but this blow*  
*Might be the be-all and the end-all here,*

22Ibid., p. 171.

23Bradley, op. cit., p. 292.
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'ld jump the life to come.

(ll. 2-7)

This is quite a brazen speech. If his sense of duty is based on a Christian view of conscience, it certainly lacks several component parts of a Christian conscience. In this speech he leaves out all that love involves and grounds his moral system on fear of future punishment. He is, therefore, stripping his reasoning to the bare pragmatic bones when he says that the basic reason he hesitates to murder Duncan is his fear of eternity.

Macbeth's misfortune, then, is not that he fails to recognize either the eternal or the temporal ramifications of his base plan. "He has never, to put it pedantically, accepted as the principle of his conduct the morality which takes shape in his imaginative fears." He is not sufficiently disciplined, ethically or intellectually, to cope with a moral or mental crisis. He is susceptible to preternatural suggestions which frighten him and which "leave him a prey to self-torture and self-excusing in a war with conscience." If Macbeth had plainly told his wife that he considered the murder to be vile and that in spite of his oath he will not murder his king, her arguments would have been destroyed. He does approach this position when he says,

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24Ibid., p. 284.
I dare to all that may become a man;
   Who dares do more is none,
   \( \text{(I, vii, 46-47)} \)

but he allows himself to be overwhelmed with beastly personal abuse, probably because he has failed to make his conception of manliness a habit.

After he has murdered his king, Macbeth expresses a desire for the blessing of God on his life. When he tells his wife about hearing someone praying near Duncan's room, he reports,

\[
\text{I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' Stuck in my throat.} \quad \text{\( \text{(II, ii, 32-33)} \)}
\]

At the same time he realizes that he has separated himself from any peace God could provide. That Macbeth hopes to violate God's law and have His blessing at the same instant seems rather grotesque. He is well aware of the enormity of his act, but his ambition outweighs his moral scruples. While he desperately hopes for blessing even on his wickedness, he is not willing to surrender the results he expects from Duncan's murder. He is a most pitiful figure; because, although he appears to want to be a colossal creature of evil, his moral system will not allow him to be. Because evil frightens him, he feels that he must hedge himself about with every possible protection. Part of this hedge he builds by trying to destroy every person who might be a hazard to his sovereignty and life. When he complains about the "amen" refusing to pass through his vocal cords, he actually hopes
for no respite from his pangs of conscience. Gazing at his bloody hands, he moans,

No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous sea incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

(II, ii, 61-63)

He knows that his sin has affected his entire personality because he has chosen for it to do so. God cannot pardon him until he chooses to place himself under His influence again.

In Macbeth's conscience is included the concept that the substratum of sin is the decision to commit the fault. This idea is indicated by the fact that he worries about his action anterior to the crime and knows that the act itself is simply a matter of carrying out the decision. Although he is concerned about the consequences of his exploit at the beginning of Act I, Scene 7, he has decided to murder his king and risk the life to come. Macbeth argues with his conscience briefly, but his wife has little trouble persuading him to renew his purpose. She knows, however, that he will never commit the murder unless she can infuse into his mind enough emotional commitment. He does not need to be persuaded mentally to carry out the murder; he has already made up his mind. His rumination at this point seems to concern not the morality of his plan, but the question whether or not he can successfully murder the king without suspicion's falling on him. His wife has only to say, then,
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.

What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan? what not put upon
His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt
Of our great quell?

(I, vii, 60-61; 69-72)

This speech contains the encouragement Macbeth needs. All of his corporal agents are ready for the act; the passage to remorse in his system has been sealed off, at least for the moment.

When remorse returns to him again, Macbeth plots the death of Banquo because he is an objectification of Macbeth's guilty conscience, and he hopes that his mind will rest more peacefully when Banquo's goodness is not present to remind Macbeth of his evil. This false hope is terrifyingly eliminated when Banquo's ghost appears. The fact that Macbeth is the only person to see the ghost seems to indicate that Shakespeare is making an effort to show objectively what is occurring in his protagonist's mind. This mental agony is far more painful to Macbeth than any physical agony he might have to endure. When he saw others murdered, the act did not seem so dreadful. He remarked to his wife that men had shed blood, but "when the brains were out, the man would die" (III, iv, 79). Now he is in the position of the murderer, and he feels the psychological pain of being pushed from his stool, where he feels at home and is peaceful. A few lines
later he confesses that rather than face the spiritual peril which confronts him he would brave any physical danger,

the rugged Russian bear,
The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble: or be alive again,
And dare me to the desert with thy sword.
(III, iv, 100-104)

But his mind quails under the pressure of the "horrible shadow," against which he feels helpless. He fears that his blood will be required for the blood he has shed and, because of this premonition, stations servants in the households of those he suspects of disloyalty. But he does not fear these potential enemies as much as he fears the psychological effects of the murder he has perpetrated.

Harrison believes that "by no stretch of charity can Macbeth be considered a good man or a sympathetic character." He knows that he is committing an unjustifiable wrong for which he will receive temporal punishment in addition to probable eternal punishment. It is true that he is tempted by the weird sisters and goaded by his wife to commit the crime. In addition, Blackmore feels that Duncan's elevation of Malcolm to Prince of Cumberland caused Macbeth to feel wronged, since Macbeth could have assumed the throne upon Duncan's death under the existing Scottish laws. These factors, magnified


\[27\]Blackmore, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
by his battle-weariness, cause this disappointment to flash
about his brain, making him more susceptible to sin. Never-
theless, as Macbeth enumerates the terrors of the night in
Scene 1 of Act II, "he is wrought up to a degree of frenzy,
that makes him afraid of some supernatural discovery of his
design, and calls out to the stones not to betray him, not
to declare where he walks." 28 He is about to commit a delib-
erate murder under the unequivocal conviction that he is
perpetrating villainy.

The imagination of Macbeth plays a decided part in the
function of his conscience. "The terrifying images which
deter him from crime and follow its commission, and which
are really the protest of his deepest self, seem to his wife
the creations of mere nervous fear, and are sometimes re-
ferred by himself to the dread of vengeance or the restless-
ness of insecurity." 29 The ghost, and the other images which
repulse Macbeth from crime, create in him a fear of wrong-
doing, for his imagination is stirred by that which thrills
and often by that which creates supernatural fear. He says
that before his conscience became burdened with crime,

my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't.

(V, v, 10-13)

28 Samuel Johnson, Samuel Johnson: Notes to Shakespeare

29 Bradley, op. cit., p. 280.
Everything which appalls him is of this character; he does not fear tangible dangers. One of the chief methods of his conscience "is to summon up remembrance of things past"—things which he cannot alter.

His imagination, working with his conscience, brings to his attention the public esteem his recently bestowed honors have brought to him (I, vii, 32). "As a motive, the hope to stand well in the esteem of one's fellows, to be worthy of fame amongst them, is an old-ingrained moral impulse." In the same passage he sees human justice as an "even-handed" judge ready to sentence him for his crime. He is reminded, moreover, that his fellows may be disloyal to him just as he plans to be disloyal to his sovereign:

> Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return To plague the inventor.  
> (I, vii, 9-10)

After all of his wife's forceful arguments for the murder of Duncan, his imagination vividly flashes to his mind the ramifications of his short articulation, "If we should fail?" (I, vii, 69) The overtones of this utterance provide one of the best examples of the power of Macbeth's imagination. Does he fear detection? Does he fear that he may murder Duncan and still have to bow to Malcolm? Does he

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30 Elmer Edgar Stoll, op. cit., p. 89.

fear the vileness of the murder and failure to be able to cope with his conscience? Does he fear that he may begin the crime and not successfully complete it? Because all of these fears, and more, are probably involved in his question, it seems strange that his wife should be able to allay his fears by removing only one of them with her suggested murder plan. But he is prompted to overrule his conscience more than once by an argument which contains little logic.

It is plain that the deceptive plan of the witches is effective only because Macbeth has a conscience which is strong and insistent. They tell him not to fear anyone born of woman, but immediately his conscience reminds him of the goodness of the Thane of Fife, and he vows to murder Macduff in order to "make assurance double sure" (IV, i, 82). Because Macduff is the present symbol of Macbeth's sleeplessness, they tell him to be "bloody, bold, and resolute . . . lion-mettled, proud" (IV, i, 79-90) so that he will think that his life is in harmony with the laws of nature. Then Banquo's descendants are paraded before him until he is overcome with remorse and despair. When he looks up, they have vanished, and he curses the air on which they ride. Lennox suggests to him that he still has the option of choosing good or evil when he asks, "What is your will?" He must repent or plunge on into crime. Because Macduff's goodness galls Macbeth, his pride assumes precedence over his conscience. He decides to murder Macduff's entire family and to do it
quickly before any more sights appear to dampen his purpose. It is significant that Macbeth must hire assassins to murder Macduff's family, for he cannot bear the sight of murdered bodies.

When Macbeth tells Macduff, "My soul is too much charged/ With blood of thine already" (V, viii, 5-6), he means that he has suffered remorse for his decision to murder the godly thane's family. The ghosts of Macduff's family have evidently haunted Macbeth as they haunted his wife (V, i, 47 ff). And just as he is dismayed by the presence of Banquo, he is rebuked by Macduff, whose character reproves Macbeth's entire way of life. When the Thane of Fife tells him to despair of his charm, Macbeth's hellish hope vanishes. He has one final chance to repent and condemn the evil promptings inside him, but instead he overrules his striving conscience:

Accursed be that tongue that tells me so, For it hath cow'd my better part of man!

(V, viii, 17-18)

His pride is pre-eminent. He will not yield to the overtures of his conscience.

Since Macbeth's moral structure is so enduring, in spite of his wickedness, it would not be proper to call him a successful villain. "Macbeth is a tragic hero . . . . Pity, love, and fear are strong forces in his nature, and when he tries to submerge them, they resist steadily and exact their
penalty. When he is reflecting on the moral ramifications of the predictions of the witches, his imagination vividly displays the promptings of his conscience. The change in his moral life comes when he begins to interpret the images his conscience prompts to be merely "proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain" (II, i, 39). And when he thus denies his conscience, his mind must find a meaning for what he seems to see. With the temerity of a devil he reverses the import of his mental visions and chants demonically:

There's no such thing:
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.  

(II, i, 47-56)

When he is preparing to have Banquo murdered, he again uses his imagination, but this time to confirm himself in the course he has decided upon. He tells himself:

For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!

(III, i, 65-70)

This, and the speech he makes to his wife just before the murder of Banquo, "surely involves some recognition by Macbeth of the power he can evoke by words."33 He is able to overpower the pleadings of his conscience with the eloquent rhetoric he is able to create. He uses his power of language against himself, however, when he realizes that the ocean cannot wash his hands and when he realizes that he would be in a better condition if he were with Duncan in the grave. "That heartsickness which comes from Macbeth's perception of the futility of his crime, and which never leaves him for long, is not, however, his habitual state."34 In the first place the consciousness of guilt is more powerful in him than the consciousness of failure, and in the second place his ambition is too vigorous to permit him to think of defeat. Nevertheless, "the word can demonstrate that the forces for good are still alive in Macbeth, still struggling, and still not entirely separated from the forces of language."35

33Ibid., p. 276.
34Bradley, op. cit., p. 286.
35Stein, op. cit., p. 279.
CHAPTER II

MACBETH'S EFFORT TO ADJUST TO HIS CONSCIENCE

Beginning with his defiance of Banquo's ghost, Macbeth seems to be developing a new theory about his fear of punishment. He has decided that not only will the elimination of his supposed enemies free him from the men whose righteousness annoys his conscience, but it will in addition so accustom him to crime that he will become indifferent to his conscience. Because he believes that he is too great a sinner to obtain God's mercy ("I am in blood/Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,/Returning were as tedious as go o'er"), his first step is to consult the representatives of hell about his future. Like Israel's King Saul when he felt forsaken of God, Macbeth turns to the opposite side of the moral picture for help. His plan then is to drive himself headlong into crime:

> My strange and self-abuse
> Is the initiate fear that wants hard use:
> We are yet but young in deed.
> (III, iv, 142-144)

Every man who gets in his way is to suffer, for he is going to drive a murderous path through mankind until his own death overtakes him. From the witches he will know the worst, and anyone who interrupts his crazed efforts to drown his conscience will experience his worst blows. He seems to be
convinced that he is eternally doomed, whether he halts his crime spree or continues it. Since this is the case, he decides that he will enjoy the fruits of his crime as long as possible. For the same reason that he planned Banquo's death, then, he continues to make an effort to soothe his throbbing mind by trying to eliminate every threat to his royal position.

Even before the death of Duncan, Macbeth devises means of pushing his conscience into the background. He says that he will mark the guards with Duncan's blood not only in an effort to implicate them in the murder, but also to avert attention from the fact that his hands will be stained with innocent blood. He uses their daggers, as well, in an attempt to keep his clean. A further effort to adjust to his conscience is his use of euphemisms. "The phrase 'this terrible feat,'" for example, "is exquisitely, tragically euphemistic. That 'terrible' evades the far more accurate and repulsive terms haunting the mind of the audience: dastardly, foul, beastly, hellish."¹

Banquo, however, causes Macbeth's conscience more concern than any other person or event in the play. There are several reasons for Macbeth's anxiety about his friend and adviser. One is that Banquo is quite certain of Macbeth's crime, and Macbeth feels that he must banish Banquo from his

¹Elliott, op. cit., p. 74.
sight if he is to allay his political fears. Since the
witches predicted that Banquo will be the progenitor of a
line of kings, while Macbeth will die childless, Banquo could
do one of two things. He could reveal Macbeth as the mur-
derer of Duncan, or he could lead a revolt against Macbeth's
government.

A second reason why Macbeth resents Banquo is that he
feels that Banquo's ability to produce children is a bad
reflection on his manhood. Barron believes that Lady Macbeth
uses the figure of a child milking her to incite her husband
to make a supreme effort to prove his masculinity.² His
infertility and Banquo's fertility seem to be issues which
make Banquo vexatious to Macbeth. "He [Macbeth] is unable
to have issue--i. e., heirs--in the real world because he and
his wife have chosen to dwell in the nightmare which has no
real issue--i. e., consequence."³

More significant to this discussion is the fact that
Macbeth fears Banquo for moral reasons. In a soliloquy he
reminds himself of his greatest fear of his friend:

Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd.
(III, i, 49-51)

²David B. Barron, "The Babe That Milks: An Organic
Study of Macbeth," The American Imago, XVII (Summer, 1960),
136.

³Ibid., p. 151.
"His fears regarding Banquo do verily stick deep. Piercing his soul, like daggers of conscience and imagination, they remain fixed. They may be removed only by penitence. But instead there is increasing, violent, confused remorsefulness." What bothers Macbeth is that although he reigns above Banquo, his friend's "royalty of nature" reigns above him. Even though he can no longer endure the spiritual ascendency of Banquo, neither can he bear the thought of destroying his friend. For this reason he emphasizes a fear which is already present and "tries desperately to picture him [Banquo] as a dangerous political foe." The presence of Banquo rasps his raw conscience and thus steals the inner happiness of the recently crowned king. When Macbeth can bear it no longer, he calls on Night to "cancel and tear to pieces the great bond/Which keeps me pale!" (III, ii, 49-50) This bond appears to be all of the invisible shackles by which his conscience causes him mental agony. Because Banquo and Fleance are the objectification of this bond, he attempts to destroy it by destroying them, only to find that his scheme is grotesquely hopeless. Even after the death of Banquo he cannot rest more than he could following the murder of Duncan "but must keep on wearily adding horror to horror, unable to

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4Elliott, op. cit., p. 110.
5Ibid., p. 111.
'trammel up the consequence' (I, vii, 3) of his original assassination."⁶

Perhaps it is significant that Macbeth and his wife have no children, for unproductive evil in them seems to be opposed to the productivity of nature. In addition to granting Lady Macbeth's prayer for the removal of her sex, the powers of darkness have told Macbeth that he cannot serve as the sire of a line of kings.

Although Macbeth's conscience troubles him severely, it does not govern his moral acts following the murder of Duncan. When he professes a willingness to "jump the life to come," he knows that he has his "eternal jewel/Given to the common enemy of man." Because of this decision, he feels that his life is unalterably damned; and his subsequent actions become amoral in a way. He believes that further sinning will not alter the judgment against his life, because his attitude toward repentance remains the same. Since he has defiled his mind with the murder of Duncan, he tries to eliminate Banquo's descendants, for he would rather fight fate itself than face the idea of having put scorpions in his mind for another person's benefit. The punishment of eternity cannot be escaped, but the fear of being pushed from the throne while he is still alive can be eliminated. He considers it

better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

(III, ii, 19-22)

When he is warned that Macduff is dangerous to his person, he resolves to eliminate his family, if he cannot touch his life. It is significant that both times he tries to remove threats to his position he fails to murder the important persons--Fleance and Macduff. His murders of Banquo and Macduff's family seem useless, or even more dangerous to his position and person, just as they are useless in eliminating the real problem from his mind.

Macbeth's effort to convince himself that his social plans are amoral is dominated by his imagination. He speaks to the lights of the universe and of his body:

Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(I, iv, 50-53)

His use of these metaphors of darkness seems to indicate that "Macbeth wants somehow to get away from or hoodwink his conscience and self-knowledge and do the deed without knowing it." When he utters his soliloquy during the banquet he is providing for Duncan (I, vii), it becomes apparent that he is making a supreme effort to eliminate from his mind the

7Empson, op. cit., p. 89.
moral aspects of his action. He tries to make all of the
deterrents to the crime which he thinks about revolve around
his self-interest, but he cannot keep from his consciousness
the eternal connotation of "the life to come," though the
phrase could refer to the remainder of his life. Perhaps
Empson oversimplifies, then, when he asserts that "after the
murder he [Macbeth] has no morality but only bad dreams of
being assassinated, which drive him on from crime to crime
(but it is the suppressed feeling of guilt, surely, which
emerges as a neurotic fear)." Macbeth makes a herculean
effort to submerge his conscience in his subconscious mind,
but although he is able to remove the sharp edge from his
conscience (V, v, 9-15), he is never able to restrain it
completely from interfering in his social activities.

There is, consequently, another facet of Macbeth's
problem. Although he at times seems to consider his actions
subsequent to the death of Duncan unrelated to his conscience,
he continues to the end of the play to be plagued with the
scorpions in his mind. He tells his wife:

We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it:
She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.

(III, ii, 13-15)

He further explains that although he sent Duncan to his grave
to "gain our peace," he cannot sleep now. This misfortune he
blames on Banquo, whose death he plans to ease his sleeplessness. "He kills another man, destroys, that is, another piece of human nature. But, in doing so, he destroys the human nature in himself." His hopes are completely shattered when the ghost of the "grown serpent" destroys his peace of mind. It is significant that he commands the spirit to "take any shape but that." The ghostly shape is the only one his conscience will allow it to take, and it strikes from possibility his hope for release from the throes of his conscience.

Just anterior to the appearance of the ghost of Banquo, Macbeth expresses a desire to have his adviser present. "As after his first murder, he is assailed by a yearning that his victim could suddenly come alive again (II, ii, 74)." His self-control, which is remarkably firm following the murder of Duncan, grows completely out of hand following the murder of Banquo. His elaborate precautions for circumventing his conscience seem to foreshadow the failure which actually does occur. Both times the phantom appears to his imagination it does so immediately after Macbeth's mention of Banquo's absence. The murder has so freshly injured his conscience that he can banish the sight of it only by smashing

9Bradley, op. cit., p. 182.
10Elliott, op. cit., p. 130.
his conscience under the force of his pride. He boasts of his manliness and says that he will place himself on the same level with the doll of a girl if he cannot defend himself against Banquo in his natural shape (III, iv, 99-108). With a feverish effort he tries to plunge the accusing ghost below his threshold of consciousness:

Hence, horrible shadow!
Unreal mockery, hence! Why, so: being gone,
I am a man again.  

(III, iv, 106-108)

The ghost disappears, but Macbeth is afraid of more than his conscience now, for his lords leave the banquet suspicious of his semi-confessions of murder.

In desperation he resorts to the witches for comfort; (IV, i) and although their prophecies do not change his conscience, for he believes that murder is wrong to the time of his death, his actions are influenced by the witches' utterances as well as his conscience and his fatalistic view of his future life. His first decision following his conference with the supernatural beings is to send murderers to surprise the castle of Macduff because the witches warned him about the Thane of Fife. When Malcolm and Macduff come with the English force, Macbeth fortifies Dunsinane instead of preparing to fight on the field, since he has been told by the witches that he does not need to fear "until/Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come against him" (IV, i, 92-94). During the battle Macbeth expresses little
fear of death. In a speech following the death of young Siward he says,

Thou wast born of woman.
But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.
(\textit{V, vii, 11-13})

He soon discovers, however, that he has falsely placed his hopes:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.
(\textit{V, viii, 19-22})

Birnam wood did come to Dunsinane hill, and he did meet a man not born of woman, whose desire for revenge has been whetted by Macbeth's murder of his family and servants. Thus the protection behind which Macbeth believes he is hiding dissolves into air, and he is forced finally to admit the direness of his spiritual poverty.
CHAPTER III

THE STATE OF MACBETH'S MIND

Shakespeare's conception of a mind caught in an agony of compunction for major sin is painfully reported by the protagonist in Macbeth. His first reaction to the murder of Duncan is remorse, sharpened by the belief that one of the sleepers in his house has accurately predicted the complete annihilation of his peace of mind. "Sleep no more!" he repeats,

'Macbeth does murder sleep,' the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

(II, ii, 36-40)

The word course in line thirty-nine is sometimes taken to refer to a part of a meal, but Fatout believes that it may also refer to a "way, manner, habit."¹ Macbeth says that sleep is the "death of each day's life" so that if death is the first way of bringing peace to the weary person, sleep is nature's second means of bringing at least a temporary rest to the weary mind. This interpretation makes

Macbeth's thought a terror-fraught one; he hopes for no rest from this point on, either in his time or in eternity.

He cannot seriously consider this cry to be the sentencing of his sleep unless he believes that there is a strong possibility that it will really be executed. He fears that each night of his life will be like a living death and that he will have to forego "sore labor's bath" because he has severed his connection with the divine "balm of hurt minds."

He must refer to more than biological sleep in this case, since "hurt minds" require more than rest if they are to achieve healing. When his wife asks him what he means, he explains,

'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

(II, ii, 42-43)

Glamis flagrantly violated his conscience and will not be able to enjoy his new position as Thane of Cawdor, but it is more significant that he will not be able to enjoy the position he is to gain because of his murder. His mind will become raw with care; for, from this point, Macbeth seems to become involved in a living death.

As Macbeth stands with blood dripping from his murder weapons, he thinks that he hears a voice, which is not heard by his wife, condemning him for his crime. Elliott suggests that "it was the voice of God (II, ii, 27 and 30) speaking through nature, employing terms that were vivid in the guilty
listener's mind."² Walker believes the sound to be the result of Macbeth's imagination. He does not know "what voices are these that groan and cry within and about him."³ Whatever is the source of the voice, the guilt-laden Thane of Glamis cannot bear to return to the scene of his murder. The remorse for his deed is so strong that he fears to think about what he has done, and as his wife leaves with the daggers of Duncan's guards, Lennox and Macduff's knocking harrows up his soul:

*Whence is that knocking?*
*How is't with me, when every noise appals me?*

(II, ii, 57-58)

"For him it is not 'a knocking at the south entry' (66): it is an appalling 'noyse' (58) coming from every point of the compass, sequel of the noise (15) of the voice that cried out more and more loudly 'to all the house': increasingly the 'great Nature' he assailed is assailing him."⁴

When Macbeth tells the characters gathered in his courtyard,

*Had I but died an hour before this chance,*
*I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant,*
*There's nothing serious in mortality:*
*All is but toys: renown and grace is dead;*

²Elliott, op. cit., p. 87.
⁴Elliott, op. cit., p. 89.
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of,
(II, iii, 96-101)

he is being forced to speak hypocritically; but these words are vitally connected with his feeling about the death of Duncan. His "blessed time" is passed, and his accursed time has arrived. Since he has destroyed sleep and lives in a continual consciousness of time, he no longer enjoys the normal sequence of night and day. When Macbeth comments on his murdering sleep immediately following the murder of Duncan, "it is difficult to distinguish between the voice of conscience speaking directly through Macbeth, and the same voice speaking (as he imagines) from outside him."\(^5\) "To know my deed," he moans, "'twere best not know myself" (II, ii, 73). He means, "It were better for me to remain permanently 'lost' in thought, i. e. self-alienated, than to be fully conscious of the nature of my deed."\(^6\) He is so enveloped in his remorse that Lady Macbeth must remind him to put on his bed clothes to conceal the fact that they have not been in bed.

During the first two acts of the drama Macbeth exists under a taut emotional pitch. The mental pressure which he endures during this period is probably enough to upset the equilibrium of a person of lesser character. This

\(^5\)Muir, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 56.

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 59.
nervous state is an evident factor in the early stages of Macbeth's life of crime. Bossler suggests that one of the reasons for Macbeth's yielding to temptation is his "battle fatigue." During the battle just anterior to the action of the drama, he experienced "continuous bodily danger, incessant exertion, recurrent attacks of the enemy, the sight of death, and a feeling of frustration." Following this intense period of excitement, he receives a form of rebuff from Duncan; and to make his state more strained, Lady Macbeth is ready, not to comfort and soothe him, but to drive his overspent nerves on to greater emotional tension, under which he chafes to receive a due reward for his work on the battlefield. He is not, then, in a normal frame of mind; and his decision to murder Duncan is made under the pressure of nervous lassitude, as well as the other influences which affect him. When he has committed the act, his nerves are still in a state of extreme duress; and his conscience, stimulating these raw nerves in his brain, plays havoc with his thinking.

The condition of a person's body inevitably influences his mind; and if he possesses a sensitive conscience, it will become unreliable during a period of mental exhaustion. When this phenomenon occurs, both factors aggravate each other:

7Robert Bossler, "Was Macbeth a Victim of Battle Fatigue?" College English, VIII (May, 1947), 436.
the more the mind is fatigued, the more the conscience is agitated, and the more the conscience is agitated, the more the mind becomes fatigued. This state of affairs is exactly the one in which Macbeth finds himself. When he has become extremely tired by his participation in battle, his conscience bothers him because thoughts about the assassination of his king occur to him:

why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature?
(I, iii, 134-137)

When his mind is further wearied by Malcolm's elevation and his wife's ungodly and inflammatory advice, he becomes morally confused and tells his wife, "We will speak further" (I, v, 72). Shortly after, during his soliloquy in Scene 7, he exhibits moral uncertainty. It is not that he does not know what is morally correct; it is rather that his mental and physical weariness allow him to argue about the value of what he considers an absolute moral principle. Early the next morning, under the weight of his freshly incurred guilt, he becomes totally confused and tries to ask God to bless his murder. From this point on Macbeth exhibits a strange reaction to the conscience which remains strong and insistent in him to the time of his death. His violated conscience causes him to suffer the affliction of "terrible dreams" (III, ii, 18). Influenced by this increased weariness, caused by his lack of sleep, he thinks that he can remove the pain
of his conscience by murdering Banquo. When he arranges the murder, his friend's ghost comes back to rasp the aching nerves in his brain. More sleeplessness results and more horrors are perpetrated until he must indirectly beg his doctor to "minister to a mind diseased" (V, iii, 40). Because Macbeth adamantly refuses to repent and ask God for mercy, he is required to pay the full penalty for a lifetime of unyielding violation of His law.

From Macbeth's knowledge that he achieved the kingship unlawfully arises the fear that he can lose what he gained by the murder of his sovereign. He complains to his wife:

We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it: 
She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.

(III, ii, 13-15)

He continues to tell her that he would rather be at peace with the murdered Duncan, whatever peace there might be in the after-life for a murderer, than experience these terrible dreams

That shake us nightly: better be with the dead, 
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, 
Than on the torture of the mind to lie 
In restless ecstasy.

(III, ii, 18-22)

Evidently he is so tormented with his guilt that he thinks any other position would be better than the one which confines him now, for even his sleep seems like an experience of hell to him. The figure which Shakespeare uses to describe the condition of Macbeth's tormented mind is one of the most
vivid in the play: "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (III, ii, 36) It is not easy to imagine how a brain which is experiencing the sting of a scorpion at every possible spot would feel. Macbeth tries to divert his mind's attention from his own guilt to the fear that Banquo's issue will usurp his throne. But when he does, he reveals to the audience the new depravity of his mind. The light of morality has almost gone out in his temple, and he now talks about Hecate and the bloody and invisible hand of night which he asks to "cancel and tear to pieces that great bond/Which keeps me pale!" (III, ii, 49-50) His attempt to bolster his failing courage he continues by boasting like a boy shouting in the dark, "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (III, ii, 55).

The condition of Macbeth's mind is due in a large degree to his extraordinary imagination, and although his imagination has a vast range, he utilizes his ability in the same way that the average man uses his power of creative thought. He uses it for good or evil, since it is a neutral agency. It does, however, help him to understand the implications of his crime. When the new Thane of Cawdor enters the presence of the gracious king, for example, his evil desires seem to be subdued until Duncan, with seeming sincerity and with no intention of inflaming Macbeth, announces the elevation of Malcolm to Prince of Cumberland. It is then that Macbeth's
imagination is converted by his will "from obstruction to furtherance of his wicked design." It is significant that Macbeth still considers his deed to be vile and that he still considers it so when his wife, enshrouded like the night that she invokes in the "dunnest smoke of hell," spurs him on to the murder. His delaying decision, "We will speak further" (I, v, 72), is some indication that he fears the wrongness of the act his wife and his will are urging upon him. Outside the banquet room he decides that "the whole scheme is not worth it: it o'erleaps itself and falls on the other side to certain destruction," but the ease with which Lady Macbeth persuades him to change his mind again is ample evidence that he has been brooding too long on the assassination. At the beginning of Act III the dagger which appears in his imagination could serve as a deterrent to his crime, but he chooses to allow it to urge him on to murder his king. "Repeatedly Shakespeare shows how a wrong volition, unless entirely eradicated, will grow strongly in the soul, for the most part subconsciously, until upon occasion it can stifle one's best reasonings, such as those of the hero in the first half of this scene [I, vii], and bear sudden fruit of disastrous action." 

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8Elliott, op. cit., p. 52.
9Charlton, op. cit., p. 171.
10Elliott, op. cit., p. 66.
Macbeth's imagination soon inflames his remorse, but at the same time it comforts him falsely by renewing his sense of his innate human-kindness. He has the ability, which is probably common in most humans, to momentarily distract his attention from his evil with the rationalization that he is, after all, quite human, even though he is violating humanity. It is the self-credulity of Macbeth's imagination led by his hopes which tempts him to violate his conscience; and the same powerful imagination led by his fears vastly increases the torments of his violated conscience. Without making Macbeth's imagination the unusual force that it is, Shakespeare could not have written the profound examination of conscience that is depicted in Macbeth.

One reason for the appearance of Banquo's ghost in Act III, Scene 3, seems to be Shakespeare's attempt to objectify the condition of Macbeth's mind. In line fifty he reacts to the presence of Banquo's ghost in his mind by denying his part in the murder. This reminder of the slaying of his late adviser so fills him with fear, nevertheless, that he tells his wife that the devil would be appalled to allow himself to be reminded of such a deed. Lady Macbeth tries to shame her husband by telling him that "This is the very painting

11Ibid., p. 22.

of your fear" (III, iv, 61). She is correct, of course; conscience is subjectively based and Macbeth only saw the ghost mentally. But she is forgetting, for the moment, that a subjectively-based fear is much more insistent than an objectively-based fear. Macbeth says specifically that memory of a murder is much more unfriendly to the mind than is the actual murder (III, iv, 80-83), and he would rather face any objective danger than an inner fear (ll. 99-106). He can destroy a man physically, but he cannot destroy the memory of his murders. After the illusion leaves him, however, the facet of his mind which has been dyed black by the blood of his victims appears to the audience. On the heels of his intense fear, he begins to formulate a plot against the life of Macduff.

The degeneration of his mind is further indicated by his resorting to the emissaries of the devil. He admits that this method of discerning the future is the worst, but he is determined that "all causes shall give way" for his good—a little more life, the only good he can hope for (III, iv, 136). He tells the witches that he does not care what catastrophe may shake Nature; he wants them to answer his questions. The distortion of his nature is further exemplified in his abuse of his servants. He rebukes one of them, not because of the servant's disservice, but because of Macbeth's psychological disorder:
The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!  
Where got'st thou that goose look?  

(V, iii, 11-12)

To his physician he shouts, "Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it" (V, iii, 47). A final indication of the degeneration of Macbeth's mind is his comment just before the death of Lady Macbeth which shows his "complete atrophy of heart"13:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears:  
The time has been, my senses would have cool'd  
To hear a night-shriek;  
... ... ... ... ... ...  
I have supp'd full with horrors;  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me.  

(V, v, 9-15)

He means that the horror of his murders is so great that his senses are now dulled to circumstances which ought to appall him. But he may also mean that his mental torture is far worse for him than any other pain could possibly be. Macbeth has almost reached the end of a life of continual moral disintegration. "He becomes, in a literal sense, a nervous wreck, a distracted mortal possessed more and more by more and more terrors which haunt his days and turn his nights to sleepless torments."14 He has had to eat his meals in fear and endure horrible nightmares in his sleep; he has not known the mere contentment of ease nor the feeling of personal integrity since the night when he sent his king to peace.

13 Goddard, op. cit., p. 111.
14 Charlton, op. cit., p. 178.
If Macbeth's description to his doctor of his wife's mental malady may be taken as a "veiled confession" of his own condition, this speech is an indication of the pitiful hopelessness which overwhelms his severely troubled mind. The doctor has said that Lady Macbeth is

Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies,
That keep her from her rest.

(V, iii, 37-39)

Macbeth had boasted, "I am settled, and bend up/Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (I, vii, 79-80). He reasoned that his blood was thick enough to stop all of the passages to remorse. But the doctor reports that the "thick-coming fancies," the cause of which he now knows, have sealed up Lady Macbeth's passages to rest. Macbeth's pitiful plea follows:

Cure her of that.
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

(V, iii, 39-45)

Macbeth seems to moan out to his physician the agonies of his own mind: "a rooted sorrow" of the memory, one which cannot be pulled up, for the roots only sprout again, and "written troubles of the brain," which cannot be erased because they are permanently engraved. He has found nothing

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15Elliott, op. cit., p. 197.
which can make him forget the deed that he fears will cause him anguish after death. It hangs on his mind so heavily that he expects it to pull his soul after it into hell. He can, as does his wife in her sleep, confess to the good doctor, but his pride does not allow him to take this medicine which would cure his sick heart. "His soul's despair is lethal: he has rightly named it 'Death.'" He is seen losing his sense of balance during the first part of this scene when he admits to himself:

I am sick at heart,

... my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
(V, iii, 19-28)

The final expression of Macbeth's hopelessness occurs in Scene 5 of Act V. He has just been informed of the death of his partner in crime, and as he muses about the manner in which he has prepared for "hereafter," the idea occurs to him that

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(11. 24-28)

Ibid., p. 201.
"This speech is the culmination of Macbeth's spiritual tragedy."\textsuperscript{17} He has spent his life no better than an idiot might. The clashing figures in this speech—"brief candle" and "sound and fury"—are a further indication of Macbeth's disintegration.\textsuperscript{18} Although his life has been accompanied by a great deal of bustle and noise, it does not signify anything worthwhile, and he comes to the end of his time a useless, hated, broken tyrant. He arrives at the conclusion that life as he has lived it contains nothing serious and that it is entirely empty of any conceivable meaning. In making this statement, he moves his philosophy into timelessness: every man who consistently violates the moral laws of the universe lives with no lasting purpose. The murder which skewed Macbeth's path from normality has sent him so far afield that he appears to be only a shadow, because he has almost removed himself from the range of life's candle.

\textsuperscript{17}Charlton, op. cit., p. 181.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEPRAVITY OF MACBETH'S SOUL

If a man's mind achieves a state of sin so black that he can say that he has his "eternal jewel/Given to the common enemy of man" (III, i, 68-69), as can Macbeth, he is also saying that he once had an eternal jewel to give, that he was once a follower of his conscience. In the play, Macbeth is rarely, and then only weakly, seen obeying his moral code, but he does have one and must have been a genuinely moral man anterior to the action of the drama. The witches play a significant part in Macbeth's violation of his conscience, and if they are interpreted to be representatives of the evil influences in the world, they may play a more significant role in the development of Macbeth's degradation than is immediately noticeable.

These unnatural beings first appear during the battle in which Macbeth distinguishes himself, their purpose being to plan when next to continue their business with Macbeth. It is possible, then, that they were tempting Macbeth to usurp the throne while he was brandishing his steel in the "great defense" of his country, and probably before this time. After the seed of temptation has had time to germinate, they intend to meet him on his way home from battle.
and cultivate the desire that will need some encouragement from them if it is to jump the hurdle of the thane's conscience.

The nature of the weird sisters has received a widely varied interpretation from critics of Shakespeare. These beings seem generally to be considered characters of fantasy, symbols of the unseen forces of nature and spirit, or humans who have linked themselves with the denizens of hell. Nicoll suggests,

We can see in them evil ministers tempting Macbeth to destruction, or we can look on them merely as embodiments of ambitious thoughts which had already moved Macbeth and his wife to murderous imaginings. The peculiar thing to note is that through Shakespeare's subtle and suggestive art we do not regard these two points of view as mutually antagonistic.1

Holinshed stated that three views were in vogue during his era: the sisters were considered (1) imaginary beings, or (2) the Fates or Norns, or (3) women practicing black art.2 Bradley takes the third view when interpreting the witches in Macbeth. "They are," he asserts, "old women, poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite, occupied in killing their neighbors' swine or revenging themselves on sailors' wives who have refused them chestnuts."3 He

1Nicoll, op. cit., p. 123.
2Paul, op. cit., p. 65.
3Bradley, op. cit., p. 272.
continues, however, that they "have received from evil spirits certain supernatural powers." This connection is indicated by their ability to control winds and storms (I, ii, 25), their ability to disappear suddenly from sight (I, iii, 79-80), and their ability to know the future (I, iii, 107).

Craig says that "the 'weird sisters' in Macbeth are certainly emissaries of the devil, but Shakespeare has lowered their status by giving them the tricks of Scottish witches." The weird sisters in Macbeth, Ribner believes, "are no more than convenient dramatic symbols for evil," but Stoll disagrees. "The Weird Sisters," he states, "are no more subjective or symbolical than is Athena in the Iliad." Charlton believes that the witches are related to the dynamic energy of evil which animates the action of the play. "They are the embodied malevolence which bubbles up from nature's earth, roaming the darkness, in thunder and lightning, secret, black, and midnight hags, who hover in the borderland between the natural and the supernatural and fuse the two in the dark mystery of man's universe."

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4Ibid.
5Craig, op. cit., p. 255.
6Ribner, op. cit., p. 151.
7Stoll, op. cit., p. 87.
8Charlton, op. cit., p. 145.
The breadth of opinion displayed by these critics seems to be only an indication of the range and depth of Shakespeare's mind. Probably all of the views reflect part of the truth that the poet is trying to dramatize in the characters of the witches. It does appear that Shakespeare intended for his audience to receive the weird sisters as representatives of the corps of evil ministers in the world, however else they might be described. When their appearance is compared with that of the "air-drawn dagger" and the ghost of Banquo, it is apparent that the witches are meant to be real forces in at least semi-human shape, if they are not human beings, while the dagger and ghost are products of Macbeth's imagination which are utilized by his conscience in an effort to persuade him to alter his living. This idea seems to be supported by the fact that Banquo, as well as Macbeth, sees the witches while no one but Macbeth sees the dagger and ghost, and the fact that Lady Macbeth tries to persuade her husband that the dagger and ghost do not exist, while she makes no effort to persuade him of the unreality of the witches. Both his conscience and the deputies of evil apparently are able to stimulate Macbeth's imagination, but he never loses the power to interpret the images which his conscience presents to his mind. His conscience is probably the agency which offers the dagger to his mind in order to hinder him from slaying Duncan, but he interprets it to be
an instrument of evil which is drawing him on toward the deed. The witches, on the other hand, are able to dissemble and deceive him with their images and suggestions. "At the outset there is something mysterious and wonderful about the Witches, but they grow progressively more noisome and disgusting as Macbeth yields to them." Temptation to sin universally has this relationship to the tempted. It is the witches' business to transfer in whatever manner feasible as much of their sinful blackness as possible to Macbeth. Their decadence is shown by their connection with filth and rot and death. In their ceremonial caldron, for example, they throw,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,} \\
\text{Witches' mummy, maw and gulf} \\
\text{Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,} \\
\text{Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark,} \\
\text{Liver of blaspheming Jew,} \\
\text{Gall of goat, and slips of yew} \\
\text{Sliver'd in the moon's eclipse,} \\
\text{Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,} \\
\text{Finger of birth-strangled babe} \\
\text{Ditch-deliver'd by a drab.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(IV, i, 22-31)

They are accompanied not simply by death, but putrefied death with which they oppose life. "The Witches in Macbeth are perhaps the completest antitypes to peace in Shakespeare." And to convince Macbeth that he ought to follow their leading,

\[\text{Goddard, op. cit., pp. 126-127.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 128.}\]
they are forced to resort to equivocation in order to tempt him to plunge himself into their loathsome atmosphere.

The tempters of Macbeth are so successful in their campaign to involve him in a murky environment of sin that young Siward and Macduff both place him in hell as a companion of Satan. He has become an object of a supernatural evil assault which his natural benevolence cannot withstand. "This can be overcome only by supernatural (or preternatural) goodness."\(^{11}\) Macbeth steadfastly refuses to open his spirit to this influence; he chooses rather to formulate his own proud system of living. In the darkness of his life he discovers a stark lonesomeness (V, iii, 24–26) and a cancerous disorder in his mind deadly enough to submerge him in the horror of night forever (V, iii, 39–45).

Whether or not it is accurate to say that Macbeth has an innate tendency to commit evil is difficult to judge, but that he has an inborn capacity to be tempted to perpetrate evil must be admitted. The witches are able to tempt him because they reflect and amplify his ambitious desires and because Macbeth allows these wishes to be magnified. "The power of the Weird Sisters lay, therefore, in Macbeth's affinity with evil; lay in his ruling passion, which, begetting an inordinate ambition for the crown, gave

\(^{11}\)Elliott, op. cit., p. 32.
birth to evil thoughts and regicidal purposes."\textsuperscript{12} The deed to which his wife hastens him is not merely criminal, but unholy; it is, if Macbeth believes in the divine right of kings, sacrilegious murder. Macduff surely has this doctrine in mind when he says that "murder hath broke ope/The Lord's anointed temple" (II, iii, 72-73). Macbeth knows that the temple "that is broken open is not only the person of the divine-king of Scotland but the divine-king of nature within the murderer himself."\textsuperscript{13}

It is patent that the struggle between good and evil does not involve humans only. Lady Macbeth does not rely on herself to convince her husband of the expediency of Duncan's murder. She prays to supernatural forces. Macbeth as well talks about "wicked dreams" which abuse

\textit{The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates}
\textit{Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd murder,}
\textit{Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,}
\textit{Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace.}
\textit{(II, i, 50-54)}

The imagery called up by his conscience is too powerful for Macbeth to suppress without the aid of supernatural forces of evil. When his wife, inspired by hell, prods him to murder their sovereign, he admires her daring, but what he does not think of at the moment is that "the price she has

\textsuperscript{12}Blackmore, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{13}Walker, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 45.
paid for it is barrenness and inhumanity. She is de-natured and un-sexed. In the end Macbeth finds that demonic forces can do nothing to help him submerge his conscience into his subconscious, and he only irritates his conscience when he implements the advice of his midnight companions. The absurd aspect of Macbeth's accepting their counsel is that he ought to have known better, and he would have if he had looked at the situation logically. He should have felt repulsed at the thoughts of further advice from them, but evil forces do not depend on logic. They won Macbeth to their program of evil with promises and pageantry at their first meeting with him, and they encourage him to lunge closer to complete moral ruin with the same techniques at the second meeting. They know that these methods appeal to the genius and personality of their victim. After his final meeting with the dark sisters, he knows that his moral development has come to the point at which his conscience must be totally repressed, or at which drastic methods must be devised to drown its voice. He has no hope of reaping the reward of moral activity; the only profit which remains lies in defending his throne. He can see no reason to let anything stand in his way; for if his throne is taken from him, he has nothing to sustain his will to live. Should

\[14\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 57.\]
he be taken from the stage of public focus, his life would signify nothing.

During their initial appearance in the play, the witches make the sentence, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," their theme. Banquo, who also comes under the influence of these consorts of Graymalkin and Paddock, articulates to Macbeth a fuller expression of this theme. He says:

But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

(I, iii, 122-126)

Macbeth's first speech is a version of the witches' theme: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." If it is true that these evil forces have already been communicating with Macbeth, this speech indicates that they have been successful enough to get him to use the words of their philosophy. He might mean that the day has been foul because he has engaged in battle and that it has been fair because he is victorious, but it is quite possible that he also means that pleasant positions, which are to be achieved by foul methods, have been suggested to him by vile spirits. He may not be aware of the actual intent of their doctrine at this point, but Banquo's comment seems to draw his attention to the crux of the matter. While Banquo steps aside to speak to Ross and Angus, who have announced the new thaneship of Macbeth, he tries to sort out his feelings about the suggestions and the philosophy of the witches. He ponders specifically:
This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good.
(I, iii, 130-131)

If the temptation of these purveyors of evil is ill, Macbeth cannot decide why it is connected with truth. He has received a new title; can honors be evil? If the temptation is actually good, however, he should not think of yielding to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature.
(I, iii, 134-137)

This paradoxical doctrine of the witches is one of the principal themes in the play, and its relationship to Macbeth is definitely established when he allows himself to ponder on their temptations. Blackmore believes that "though he be not yet in alliance with the powers of evil, there is, by means of his master passion, an unconscious relationship already established between his soul and the malignant spirits of temptation."\(^{15}\) In contrast, he thinks that Banquo has only a simple curiosity to know the future and that the tempting witches find no response in his being. If this interpretation is correct, however, Banquo probably would not be so thoroughly acquainted with the witches' strategy (I, iii, 122-126). Neither would he have toyed so

\(^{15}\) Blackmore, op. cit., p. 102.
dangerously just before his death with the thoughts of his offspring's ruling Scotland. The experience of the witches as messengers of evil has made them clever enough to tell both Macbeth and Banquo what they want to hear, and their attractive promises do not fail to entangle both of the men in the throes of their scheme. And while Banquo resists the temptation more strongly than does Macbeth, he is nevertheless affected by the prophecies of the weird sisters.

In order to implement further the "fair is foul" theme, Shakespeare accentuates the contrast between good and evil in Macbeth. The play is about damnation, but in order to show how his hero comes to be damned, in order to present a convincing image of damnation, Shakespeare had to describe and create the good which Macbeth had sacrificed; so that although there is no play in which evil is presented so forcibly, it may also be said that there is no play which puts so persuasively the contrasting good.16

He does this both with characters like Malcolm, Macduff, and Duncan and with effective imagery. Light is contrasted with darkness, and nature is opposed to Lady Macbeth's violated nature. Duncan's peace is shown against the exhaustion of Macbeth's sleeplessness. Macbeth is acutely aware of the villainy of his murders before he commits them. Although he does not discuss the morality of his crimes with his

16Muri, op. cit., p. li.
wife, his words display vividly his realization of the horror of his action.

The suggestion to sin obviously is not equal to sin, and Macbeth realizes this principle. "Present fears," he says, "are less than horrible imaginings" (I, iii, 137-138). But his thought,

whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

(I, iii, 139-142)

His mind is so enveloped by the insistent temptation of the witches that his conscience cannot function properly. Nothing is real to his mind at this point except what is not—his kingship. Macbeth's desire to get the throne by the shortest route is more real than his moral scruples. The idea occurs to him that chance might bring him to the crown, but he dismisses this unworkable plan. "Time and the hour runs through the roughest day," he decides (I, iii, 147). Men do not gain honors without action; if he expects to be crowned king of Scotland, he must make his own chances.

Macbeth begins to discover the meaning of the witches' philosophy immediately following the murder of Duncan. He feels that he has done what he needs to do to make his ascension to the throne possible, but with the hope comes the disquieting assault against his peace. The slaughter of the grooms at this point is significant for more than the
fact that two more men are murdered. Macbeth not only murders now, but begins also to lie and dissemble so that he finds himself being pulled into a vast whirlpool of sin. Iniquity is multiplying, and he seems to have little power to stop the multiplication. After he has assumed his throne, he has nagging fears about his safety. Every sight of Banquo reminds him that he might lose his title to this man's children. He enjoys the privileges of kingship, but with them he has to endure "terrible dreams/That shake us nightly" (III, ii, 18-19). Like a common scoundrel Macbeth hires a trio of assassins to murder Banquo and so remove him from his presence. He is unable, however, to keep Banquo's charnel-house from sending the ghost to haunt him.

It is significant that most of the prominent activity in Macbeth occurs at night, just as the appearance of Banquo's ghost does. The vision of the dagger, the murders of both Duncan and Banquo, and the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth all occur in the pitch blackness of night. The witches meet in the gloom of a storm and receive Macbeth in a cavern. Because both Macbeth and his Lady fear to execute their bloody acts in the light, they pray that the lights of the universe will be blackened. "In the whole drama

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17 Many critics have debated the question of whether or not Macbeth actually is the third murderer; but this problem is not pertinent to the present discussion, since he is guilty of the murder in either case.
the sun seems to shine only twice; first, in the beautiful but ironical passage where Duncan sees the swallows flitting round the castle of death; and, afterwards, when at the close the avenging army gathers to rid the earth of its shame."18

As Banquo approaches Macbeth's castle after his last ride, the third murderer remarks, "The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day" (III, iii, 5) which seems to be Shakespeare's way of saying that "utter darkness is imminent. Now is the time when the last streaks of day in Macbeth's nature are about to fade out forever—and here is the place."19 Some critics have objected that the murder of Duncan occurs too quickly in the drama, but the action transpires purposely in this way. Macbeth "is hurried into an ill-considered action which "he refuses to consider."20 Such phrases as "let not light see," "the eye wink at the hand," "which must be acted ere they may be scann'd," and "come seeling night" are typical of Macbeth's attitude as he follows the path outlined for him by the midnight hags. Seeling is a reference to the practice of falconers who stitched the eyelids of their hawks shut to make them tractable. Seele, then may mean to hoodwink, blind, deprive

18 Bradley, op. cit., p. 266.
19 Goddard, op. cit., p. 123.
20 Empson, op. cit., p. 88.
of sight. Because Macbeth is filling his body with darkness, he is doing precisely the opposite of the injunction, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away." Instead of closing his eye in order to keep darkness out, he is deliberately opening his faculties to an abundance of darkness. "The play is crowded with such phrases, and its prevailing darkness is a symbol of his [Macbeth's] refusal to see the consequences of his actions." Lady Macbeth becomes so fearful of the darkness in which she has destroyed her peace that she keeps a light by her continually (V, i, 26-27).

In the midst of the thick night of Macbeth's degeneration, Shakespeare occasionally allows a grotesque light to flicker across the stage as a reminder of the Stygian darkness. When it momentarily breaks the dense blackness of the night, it is "a flash of lightning, or the imagined phosphorescence of a ghost, or the faint flare of a candle moving down corridors in a sleepwalker's hand." When the "good things of day begin to droop and drowse" (III, ii, 52), the theme of the play is expedited. This is the time of day

21Muir, op. cit., p. 88.
22Matthew 5:29.
23Empson, op. cit., p. 88.
24Charlton, op. cit., p. 144.
when sinister animals, ghosts, evil spirits, as well as evil Macbeth, carry out their somber activity. "Behind the clamour of the obscure bird, lamentings pierce the air; there are strange screams of death and terrible accents of prophecy."\(^{25}\) One of the most lurid scenes is the one in which Macbeth's porter paints the murky flames of hell. This scene is too vitally connected to the thesis of the drama simply to provide comic relief. Macbeth's castle has become a moral hell into which he has allowed agents of heinous sin to come.\(^{26}\) Macbeth himself has become in some sense the "other devil," for his nature has become begrimed by the blood of his latest murder victim.

When Macbeth, sleepless and terrified, begins to become desperate and lose confidence in his doctrine of blood, the forces of evil reassure him. "Laugh to scorn/The power of man," one of their companions croaks, "for none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth" (IV, i, 79-81). Another apparition excites him with the words

\begin{quote}
Be lion-mettled, proud; and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are:
Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.
\end{quote}

(IV, i, 90-94)

Immediately, however, there is a foreboding of something amiss. The encouragement comes to the king with a stinging

\(^{25}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{26}\text{Blackmore, op. cit., p. 155.}\)
reminder of Banquo's promised line and of his murder. Even in the discussion of traitors between Lady Macduff and her son in the next scene, there is a continuing hint of the double meaning attached to the witches' statements. She tells her son that a traitor is "one that swears and lies" (IV, ii, 48). The witches seem to swear to Macbeth's safety but lie because they do not tell him every ramification of their promise. While he is betraying his friends, then, Macbeth is being betrayed by those spirits whose business it is to betray willing men.

These witches, which live in opposition to nature, are part of the symbolism of the non-natural which Shakespeare uses in Macbeth to show the depravity of the hero's soul. The bond in Macbeth's prayer, "Cancel and tear to pieces the great bond/Which keeps me pale!" (III, ii, 45-46), Ribner believes to be Macbeth's attachment to nature which he wishes destroyed so that he can violate the laws of nature and God without feeling any sense of guilt. He fully realizes that what he is doing is unnatural; for he delineates the social forces which cause him to resist the deed (I, vii, 1-28). And when taunted by his wife for cowardice, he retorts:

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.
(I, vii, 47-48)
Yet Macbeth deliberately commits the forbidden deed. "In denying nature he cuts off the source of redemption, and he must end in total destruction." Evil, "which cuts off at the root the sustenance which makes life possible," destroys; and as it does it destroys the harmonious order of nature.

Macbeth's eccentric behavior affects not only his character, but the world and the state as well. On the morning of Duncan's murder Ross says,

Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
   Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock,
      'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.
   (II, iv, 5-7)

A broken law in the affairs of men destroys the unity of the cosmos. Duncan's horses attack and eat each other (II, iv, 18), and an owl attacks and kills a falcon (II, iv, 12-13). Shakespeare also shows the disruption of nature in storms, winds, rough seas, thunder, war, witches, "or in subtle dramatic ways as in the banquet scene when everybody enters in proper order . . . but exits in confusion. The 'breach in nature' is continuous: blood, sickness, predatory animals, dark overcoming light." The keynote of this anti-nature theme is spoken by Macbeth:

27Ribner, op. cit., p. 150.
28Ibid., p. 151.
Light thickens; and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood:
Good things of day begin to droop and
drowse;
While night's black agents to their preys
do rouse.

(III, ii, 50-53)

This speech not only expresses a view of the external world, but also is a revelation of the condition of Macbeth's internal self. From the time of the murder of Duncan, Macbeth is a resident of the lonely night and endures the "uttermost torture of isolation." His predicament resembles that of Adam, whose original sin isolated him from God and forced him from the purifying presence of Sinlessness.

Macbeth begins to experience the culmination of the "fair is foul" philosophy of the witches when a messenger reports a moving grove coming toward the castle which Macbeth has confidently fortified. After hurling an angry rebuke at his messenger, he enunciates the realization which has dawned upon him:

I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt the equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth: 'Fear not, till Birnam wood
Do come to Dunsinane:' and now a wood
Comes toward Dunsinane.

(V, v, 42-46)

The theme of midnight hags is neatly tied up when Macbeth is finally forced to renounce his connection with them:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense;

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30 Knight, op. cit., p. 154.
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.
(V, viii, 19-22)

Opportunity for a change of mind seems past, and now that the charm on his life has faded away, he must either yield to forces of justice or die fighting them. He chooses to continue fighting them to the end of his life and dies, refusing to surrender even a shade of theblackness of his sin.
CHAPTER V

MACBETH'S FEAR

Cowardice is not one of Macbeth's character faults. From the beginning of the drama to the end, he exhibits a most unusual courage. His bravery in battle is attested by his comrades and inferiors. Nor is his courage simply a physical one; Macbeth shows an almost unwavering ability to defy every force. He must take a daring leap, for example, when he first decides to "jump the life to come" and embark on his career of blood. He is willing to defy fate if that is necessary in order to preserve the results of his evil (III, i, 71). He is even bold enough to devise a scheme to challenge the terrifying fear which haunts him (III, ii, 55; III, iv, 143). His last act is one of great spiritual daring; he knows that Macduff is a deadly enemy and that he will within a few minutes probably go into eternity with his hands encrusted with unforgiven blood. In spite of this knowledge, he summons a final burst of courage and defies his executioner.

On the other hand, Macbeth experiences a fear so piercing and deep-felt that at times it overwhelms his incredible courage. A study of his character leaves the reader "with
an overpowering knowledge of suffocating, conquering evil, and fixed by the basilisk eye of a nameless terror. ¹ The first time the word fear is used in the drama, it seems to be an omen of the horrible terror which is to grip the Thane of Glamis and all of the other characters, for "there is scarcely a person in the play who does not feel and voice at some time a sickening terror." ² After the prophecy of the witches, Banquo queries:

Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?
(I, iii, 51-52)

Bradley believes that no innocent man would have been startled at a suggestion of this nature, "or have conceived thereupon immediately the thought of murder." ³ His fear, then, must be the result of his guilt. Although the proph- ¹Knight, op. cit., p. 140.
²Ibid., p. 146.
³Bradley, op. cit., p. 273.
being driven. Fear is the primary emotion of the Macbeth universe: fear is at the root of Macbeth's crime.⁴

Lady Macbeth is afraid, after reading her husband's letter, that his kind nature will hinder him from obtaining the throne in the easiest way, and she appears to sense his spiritual fear when she warns him, "To alter favour ever is to fear" (I, v, 73). She taunts him with what she thinks is his lack of manly courage after she finds that she must prod him on to commit the murder. When he responds to her entire argument for the murder of Duncan with, "If we should fail?" she bids him screw his "courage to the sticking place/And we'll not fail" (I, vii, 60-61). Following this encouragement Lady Macbeth proposes a concrete plan for killing the king and at the same time avoiding suspicion (I, vii, 61-70). Macbeth's flagging resolve is immediately renewed; and although he is interested in the practical suggestion she presents, he first praises her for her courage and then for her plan (I, vii, 72-77). Macbeth is brilliant enough to devise a plan, but to this point his struggle with fear has so occupied his mind that he has not had opportunity to formulate a method for the murder.

It is soon apparent, however, that Lady Macbeth does not understand the reason for the awful fear her husband

⁴Knight, op. cit., p. 150.
speaks about. Although his ambition drives him past this fear, engendered by his conscience, he finds it a Gorgonian experience to be shaken by a fear which causes "amen" to stick in his throat. "He is well nigh mad with horror, but it is not the horror of detection." He is not concerned about the daggers, nor is it he who thinks about washing. "What he thinks of is ... an immediate judgment from heaven." It is a fear of the evil which he has embraced that has deprived him of his connection with God, and hence of his peace of mind and of his recourse to natural sleep.

"The fear-haunted mind is incapable of the repose which mind and body require in sleep. Through such incessant turbulence, the state of man is fractured, and life becomes a fitful fever which is manifestly fatal." Immediately following his murder of Duncan, fear of evil grips him so mercilessly that he shudders out to his wife:

I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't again I dare not. (II, ii, 51-52)

She still does not recognize the real basis of his terror and seems to think that he simply does not want to see Duncan's body because he imagines something to be afraid of. When she leaves with the daggers, however, he is still caught

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5Bradley, op. cit., p. 282.
6Ibid.
7Charlton, op. cit., p. 161.
in the throes of the spiritual dread which he groans has so
infested his soul that an ocean full of water cannot cleanse
him of the deed. "To know my deed," he mourns, "'twere
best not know myself" (II, ii, 73).

This fear in Macbeth is expressed in several forms,
since he tries to rationalize it in order to lessen the
pain it causes him. Noises appall him. His friends seem
to threaten his life. The ghost of one of his victims haunts
him. His servants seem to be cowards, and his lords desert
his army. Since he has committed himself to a course of
evil endorsed by the weird sisters, he spends a great deal
of energy on the rationalization that if he could eliminate
Banquo, he would be free from his fear of evil. "Macbeth
fears Banquo's 'royalty of nature,' the 'dauntless temper
of his mind,' and his wisdom. He fears them because they
are a standing reproach to his own nature, now stained with
crime." Under Banquo Macbeth's "genius is rebuk'd" (III,
i, 55-56). Before his conference with the murderers about
the killing of Banquo, he uses the word fear three times in
seven lines:

Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd: 'tis much he
dares;
And, to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour

Muir, op. cit., p. lxxii.
To act in safety. There is none but he
Whose being I do fear. (III, i, 49-55)

He vaguely hopes that by murdering Banquo he will rid himself of the reproach of Banquo's uprightness, but the act merely insures that the reproach will be eternal.9

Perhaps his explanation of this fear to his wife is a reason for her misunderstanding of his feelings. He tells her, "We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it," and a few lines later makes a reference to Banquo and Fleance. She does not seem to recognize that he is only deceiving himself when he talks about Banquo and that the real snake is his fear of evil, though he never dares to name it. He wishes to think that he kills because he fears that everyone suspects him. The fear that paralyzes many around him "urges him to an amazing and mysterious action of blood."10

The internal chaos which Macbeth recognizes "is the natural analogue to the hell to which, Macbeth recognizes in his despair, he has given his soul to no avail (III, i, 65-69)."11

Macbeth has said previously that if he could be sure of escaping the temporal consequences of his crime, he would be willing to risk the life to come (I, vii, 1-28). But the irony of this statement is that man prepares for his eternal

9Ibid.
10Knight, op. cit., p. 154.
11Siegel, op. cit., p. 156.
life during his temporal life, so that Macbeth's crime is not only a precursor to restless agitation and torture of the mind in this life, but an indication that he is to suffer after death. Although his first crime is inspired by ambition, "the remainder, from the murder of the grooms to the slaughter of Macduff's family, are inspired by fear, a fear that is born of guilt."\(^{12}\) These are not neurotic fears, but fears inspired by his conscience. "Macbeth really gives way all along from fear: fear of fear."\(^{13}\) He fears and hates Banquo because he possesses the reality of honor whereas Macbeth has only a mockery, a dream of royalty:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren sceptre in my grip.  

(III, i, 61–62)

"Macbeth's agony is not properly understood till we realize his utter failure to receive any positive joy from the imperial magnificence to which he has aspired."\(^{14}\)

Macbeth refuses to recognize the true reason for his lack of joy. While Banquo lived, Macbeth blamed him, and when the first murderer reports that Fleance has escaped, he says:

Then comes my fit again: I had else been perfect,  
Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,  
As broad and general as the casing air:

\(^{12}\)Muir, op. cit., p. lxiv.  
\(^{13}\)G. Wilson Knight, The Imperial Theme (London, 1951), p. 127.  
\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 132.
But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears. (III, iv, 21-25)

He wants to believe that Fleance is the reason for his fear now. The ghost of Banquo soon makes him realize that not even Banquo is "safe" and that instead of relieving his fear of evil, Banquo's death has only intensified the rancours in his conscience. The paradox of his stalwart courage and his intense fear of evil he partially explains when he tells the ghost that he would not be afraid if his danger would take a tangible form, but he cannot fight a shadow, a reminder of his sin which cannot be affected by a sword.

Perhaps the best example of Macbeth's attempts to rationalize his fear of evil is his antipathy for Macduff and his murder of Macduff's family. He tries to convince himself that he suspects Macduff's disloyalty simply because he does not come to the coronation banquet, and he hires murderers to kill the Thane of Fife's family only because they are related to his suspected enemy. The witches had told Macbeth to beware of the Thane of Fife, and he has reason to fear Macduff, especially after he has slaughtered Macduff's family. He does not kill this family because of the thane's disloyalty, nevertheless, but because Macduff's virtue causes Macbeth's evil to stand out in bold relief.

The witches are acutely conscious of the real meaning of Macbeth's fear, and they are careful to touch this vital emotion in their meeting with him. They tell him to take
precautions against Macduff, but then they sagely tell him to "laugh to scorn/The power of man," since no mortal person will be able to harm him. At least they want him to receive this impression, and it is the one he chooses because he needs this type of comfort. He realizes that his after-life is not going to be peaceful, but he has been furiously trying to make his mortal life peaceful by making it safe. Even this effort has been vain to this point in the drama, but the witches seem to give him the vital hope he has been searching for. They appear to give him further assurance that no rebellion, however initiated or led, will displace him from his throne.

He is still concerned about Banquo, nevertheless, and he threatens to curse the weird sisters if they do not reveal to him the future of his dead friend's family. When he sees the procession of Banquo's line, followed by his ghost, his deadly fear flashes and whips back and forth in his sensitive brain. "Horrible sight!" he shudders, "Now, I see, 'tis true" (IV, i, 122). Any reminder of Banquo seems to upset him because his friend's character reminds him of his own wickedness.

Though Macbeth makes a desperate effort to control his fear, he never fully conquers it. His order not to bring any more reports about the English forces (V, iii, 1) is an indication of his continuing struggle with fear, for the English army frightens him, although he is making an effort
to rely on the promises of the witches. He makes a further attempt at this time to bolster himself in the face of his deserting thanes by boasting:

The mind I sway by and the heart I bear
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear.
(V, iii, 9-10)

But immediately his terror is displayed when his "cream-faced loon" appears and Macbeth commands him,

Go, prick thy face, and over-red thy fear,
Thou lily-liver'd boy. What soldiers, patch?
Death of thy soul! Those linen cheeks of thine
Are counsellors to fear. What soldiers, Whey-face?
(V, iii, 14-17)

He appears to feel that he can repress his fears that "stick deep" (III, i, 49-50) and that keep his murders "sticking on his hands" (V, ii, 17). Siegel believes that at the end of his life Macbeth "has become dead to all social feeling and that he exists merely in the immediate moment, a thing unto himself."15 Macbeth, however, shows to the time of his death a fear of the supernatural, for he knows that physical death will bring him into contact with the supernatural judgment he decided to chance. "The fear with which his conscience plagued him before his first crime (I, iii, 130-140) has continued to torture him (III, ii, 21) throughout his career in ever new ways, ways varying in accordance with the dire expedients employed by him to banish that fear."16

15Siegel, op. cit., p. 154.
16Elliott, op. cit., p. 194.
Macbeth continues to be fearless in the face of physical death, but he is afraid "more than ever of death in his spirit . . . death in ghostly 'shape' condemning him for all the 'terrible . . . murders' he has perpetrated."\(^1\)

Almost until the end of his life, Macbeth clings tenaciously to the promises of the witches, and although his basic fear of evil sticks with him, he finds some comfort in their "fear not's." When his men begin to bring him reports of the advancing English forces, he loses patience with them because they are attacking his hope of safety. The weird sisters ordered him not to fear because no man will harm him. To cover up for the fear he feels in spite of their promises, he rants to his men:

> Send out moe horses; skirr the country round;
> Hang those that talk of fear.
> (V, iii, 35-36)

And still holding on to the hope of the witches, he boasts,

> I will not be afraid of death and bane,
> Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane.
> (V, iii, 59-60)

Even when the report of his servant eliminates this hope, he refuses to believe that the witches have completely betrayed him. Macbeth is an exceedingly pitiful man, crushed beneath a horrible fear of evil, who has no real hope for release. When his last apparent hope is snatched from his grasp, he staggers beneath the privation and momentarily loses his

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 196-197.
courage, refusing to fight the only mortal man who has the power to send Macbeth into the unknown beyond death to meet the consequences of his vile life. Only the Thane of Fife's taunts of cowardice revive Macbeth's determination to fight for the last few moments of his deathly life.
CHAPTER VI

MACBETH'S SELF-IMMERSION IN BLOOD

Perhaps it is Macbeth's conscience which drives him to continue his program of sinning. Romans 7:5 enunciates the principle: "Our sinful passions, aroused by the law [in our consciences], were at work in our members to bear fruit for death." This rule is certainly at work in Macbeth while righteous men are near him. Macbeth tells himself that he is afraid that Banquo's family will take the throne from him. But his real fear of Banquo is based on a much different reason. "Under him," the king mutters to himself, "my Genius is rebuked" (III, i, 54-55). He must have admitted to himself as well that Banquo's descendants have a more ethical claim to the throne than he, and he cannot seem to abide the thought of an upright family's gaining the benefits of his galling immorality. Rather than allow Banquo's sons to enjoy the Scottish throne Macbeth says, through gritted teeth,

come fate into the list,
And champion me to the utterance.

(III, i, 71-72)

He tells his hired murderers that Banquo is his enemy,

and in such bloody distance,
That every minute of his being thrusts
Against my near'st of life.

(III, i, 116-119)
The fact is, however, that Macbeth must get rid of Banquo because the latter's uprightness makes his own vileness unbearable to his conscience. Thus, ironically, Macbeth's immorality is stimulated by his sense of morality, which is vitiated but not yet dead.

Macbeth continues his program of sinning, then, in an effort to find some semblance of mental peace. It is possible that he feels a need for fatality and self-punishment in order to recompense himself for his sins. Although his wife is unaware of his plot against Banquo, Macbeth includes him in the ultimatum he utters to her:

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the world suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly.

(III, ii, 16-19)

If he can eradicate Banquo and Fleance from his vision, he hopes for some respite from the scorpions in his mind. He calls on night with its "bloody and invisible hand" to "cancel and tear to pieces that great bond/ Which keeps me pale" (III, ii, 49-50). With these words a horrible darkness seems to enshroud Macbeth, and he talks about the disappearance of good and the appearance of "black agents." When he notices that even his sinful wife is appalled at his blasphemy, he utters his sable philosophy, "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (III, ii, 55).
Macbeth in this speech seems to be making a decisive effort to make his wickedness acceptable to himself, and he feels he can do so only by committing more violence. He does not believe that savagery only is the answer, but he tries to systematize his action so that he makes death a way of life. Macbeth finds some difficulty with his system when the ghost of Banquo returns to harass him. He thinks that there was a time when the plan would have worked:

the time has been,  
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,  
And there an end; but now they rise again,  
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,  
And push us from our stools. (III, iv, 78-82)

He thinks that he can make the system work if his victims will remain in their natural shapes, but his courage cannot endure the sight of an "unreal mockery."

Macbeth is learning now what he must have suspected when his wife remarked, "A little water clears us of this deed" (II, ii, 67). He knew that he could not be cleansed because he decided to allow nothing to stop his ambition. At the murder of Duncan he stepped into a brooklet of blood which eventually swelled into an ocean of gore. There is tragic irony in Lady Macbeth's advice, for it is an echo of the Christian symbol of salvation: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed
with pure water. Lady Macbeth washed off the blood but not the guilt so that she is heard groaning in her own murdered sleep,

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.
Oh, oh, oh!

(V, i, 55-57)

In a significant sense Macbeth's remorse may be stronger than his wife's, for he grieves not about spots of blood, but an ocean of it.

When the shadow of Banquo's ghost has vanished, however, Macbeth's system of blood again seems feasible to him, and he vigorously renews his determination to practice it.

"Blood will have blood," he explains to Lady Macbeth,

Augurs and understood relations have
By magot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth
The secret'st man of blood.

(III, iv, 124-126)

Mixed with these thoughts of auguries and secret, mystical connections and blood seems to be the blood of a specific man, for Macbeth follows this speech with the demand of his wife:

How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his person
At our great bidding?

(III, iv, 128-129)

He must continue his blood-letting to be consistent with his philosophy; and since Macduff's recent activity invites suspicion, he is both a likely and a necessary murder target.

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1Hebrews 10:22.
Immediately Macbeth articulates the most definite explanation of his dire and demonical dogma which seems so profane to the ordinary mind that only a man with the most sustained spiritual courage could conceive of putting it into practice. He tells his wife that he will of his own accord visit the weird sisters,

\[
\text{for not I am bent to know,} \\
\text{By the worst means, the worst. For mine own good,} \\
\text{All causes shall give way.}
\]

And then he tells her the core of his deadly principle:

\[
\text{I am in blood} \\
\text{Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,} \\
\text{Returning were as tedious as go o' er.} \\
\text{(III, iv, 134-138)}
\]

He is determined to make himself so accustomed to crime that he will no longer feel pangs of conscience. This plan appears to be his only hope of peace; he has surrendered his eternal peace to the custody of hell.

Two colors are prominent in the life of Macbeth: the black color of sin, and its accompanying despair, and the color of blood. "It cannot be an accident that the image of blood is forced upon us continually, not merely by the events themselves, but by full descriptions, and even by reiteration of the word in unlikely parts of the dialogue."\(^2\)

From the beginning blood is prominent. The witches scarcely finish their first incantation when a bleeding sergeant stagers

\(^2\) Bradley, op. cit., p. 267.
onto the stage with a report of Macbeth's gory victory. He describes a battle so bloody that the soldiers seemed to be trying to "bathe in reeking wounds" (I, ii, 39). The cut-throat who comes to report his success to Macbeth has Banquo's blood on his face (III, iv, 12). Banquo himself is reported to have "twenty trenched gashes on his head" (III, iv, 27), and when his ghost appears he shakes "gory locks" at his terrified king (III, iv, 50-51). Later the odor and the shape and the quantity of blood form the outlines of Lady Macbeth's terrifying night scene (V, i). Even the invisible hand of night which Macbeth invokes to hide the light of goodness is bloody (III, ii, 48). "It is as if the poet saw the whole story through an ensanguine mist, and as if it stained the very blackness of the night." 

It is part of Macbeth's way of life, and Shakespeare never allows his audience to forget the color most prominent to this butcher.

During the second meeting with the witches, Macbeth receives encouragement for his sanguine determination. They tell him, "Be bloody, bold, and resolute," and they back up this advice with the promise that no ordinary man will harm him. At this patronage of his purpose Macbeth ejaculates:

Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee? And yet I'll made assurance double sure, And take a bond of fate: thou shalt not live; That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies, And sleep in spite of thunder.

(IV, i, 82-86)

Ibid., p. 268.
This is the answer to his sleeplessness and fear: keep killing. He finds encouragement in their promises, but their idea of fairness and foulness must be in the back of his mind, or he may sense the contradiction between "beware the Thane of Fife," and "none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth." He should detect their ambivalence when they tell him to scoff at fear and immediately show him the line of Banquo's descendants, followed by his dreaded ghost. But his mind is occupied only in grasping encouragement, and his immediate act following the witches' disappearance, the bloody decision to destroy the family of Macduff, reveals how anxious he is to continue his gory regime.

When Macbeth hears the number of the English force coming toward his castle, the consequences of making death his life strike him. "My way of life/Is fall'n into the sear," he says to himself. Every blessing that ought to accompany old age is reversed in his life: honor and love have become curses; obedience has become mouth-honor; troops of friends have become nothing but breath--air. He faces the fact that he has lost the natural feeling of his senses, that he has absorbed so much horror that dire circumstances do not affect him as they would a normal person (V, v). He has certainly given his "initiate fear . . . hard use" (III, iv, 143). Macbeth is able to understand the ramifications of his way of life to the end of his career. All his yesterdays "have lighted fools/The way to dusty death"
(V, v, 22-23); but if the final hours of his life show anything, they show that he is consistent to his creed of blood. "Ring the alarum-bell!" he bellows when he learns that Birnam wood is approaching Dunsinane,

Blow, wind! come, wrack! 
At least we'll die with harness on our back.

(V, v, 51-52)

And Macbeth goes down under the sword of Macduff crying,

Before my body 
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff, 
And damn'd be him that first cries 'Hold, enough!'

(V, viii, 32-34)

Blood, that has become the theme of his life, becomes his final epithet. As Malcolm and Macduff describe him, he is treacherous, devilish, "smacking of every sin/That has a name," (IV, iii, 59-60) but bloodiness is his most prominent characteristic. It is the color of his life's theme, and he dies drenched in his own red gore. It is the only epitaph he needs, for it epitomizes the achievement of his life in one color.
CHAPTER VII
MACBETH'S TRAGIC MORAL FREEDOM

To say that Macbeth is forced into his attitude toward sin by a supernatural power would not be accurate. "The chief means by which Shakespeare unifies his tragedy is by placing responsibility squarely on Macbeth."¹ He embraces ambition, a fundamental sin to Shakespeare's contemporaries, and violates the sanctity of his king and guest by murdering Duncan. It is his choice that entangles him in the throes of iniquity which eventually perverts his mind. "The freedom of the human will is the basis of moral responsibility. Without it there can be neither vice nor virtue."² The contrast between Banquo and Macbeth (I, iii) is intended to accentuate this freedom. Both men are tempted by the same powers, but Banquo thoughtfully compares the witches to bubbles on water and calmly analyzes their tactics. Macbeth's reactions are much more striking; he starts, when told that he will be king, and runs anxiously after them as they disappear. Macbeth works against his own good. He is able to anticipate and calculate the results of his actions. "He falls, not out of

¹Craig, op. cit., p. 255.
²Blackmore, op. cit., p. 67.
ignorance, foible, or weakness, but like Satan, out of defiance and ambition, willingly embraced. Conscience, with all its vivid imagery of warning, is willfully rejected."³

After Banquo realizes the consequences of yielding to the temptation of the witches, he prefers to change the subject; but Macbeth chooses to ponder the success of their prophecies, which "are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal."⁴ Later, it is Macbeth himself who decides to murder Duncan. "I am settled, and bend up/Each corporal agent to this terrible feat," he declares. "Macbeth is fully aware, of course, that he is deliberately committing himself to what he knows to be evil. His personal ambition is prompting him for his own selfish ends to acts which are contrary to all accepted codes of right conduct."⁵ Neither does he blame the condition of his mind on the witches, but admits

If't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man.

(III, i, 64-69)

Macbeth is not compelled to meet with the witches the second time, nor does he have to take their advice even then. Bradley observes that the witches are so far from having any power to compel Macbeth to accept their advice "that they

³Pack, op. cit., p. 537.
⁴Bradley, op. cit., p. 273.
⁵Charlton, op. cit., p. 150.
make careful preparations to deceive him into doing so."\(^6\) Shakespeare seems to punctuate the fact that Macbeth is wholly responsible for his actions by making his first act following his second conference with the witches one of which they had made no mention—the murder of Macduff's family.

Shakespeare was familiar with the medieval belief that a man could know some of the secrets of God with the aid of occult arts, "but the price exacted for this knowledge of the future was to sell one's soul to the devil."\(^7\) Macbeth makes no bargain for his soul; he gives it voluntarily to the enemy of his soul (III, i, 68-69). Although he receives knowledge of the future from the witches and although they urge him to be bold and bloody, they actually refuse to bargain with him and disappear when he tries to demand more information from them. "The Weird Sisters," according to Blackmore, "do not drive him to crime. They tempt him, indeed, because they find his evil nature predisposed to evil and, in consequence, expect him to take their equivocal suggestions in the most pernicious sense."\(^8\) Macbeth cannot prevent the wicked thoughts of the witches from entering his consciousness, but can eject them if he wishes. He does not reject them; in fact he welcomes them upon learning of

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\(^6\) Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 274.


\(^8\) Blackmore, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
Malcolm's promotion to Prince of Cumberland.9 The salient fact is that although the weird sisters "tempt him, and tempt him with great subtlety, they cannot force him to do it."10 Shakespeare has widened the cleft between character and conduct; in that this brave and honourable man, with no grievance, and with his thoughts bent upon the heinousness of the crime, and little on the sweet fruition of an earthly crown, kills, asleep, an old man, his guest and his king, who has borne himself so clear in his high office, loved and trusted him, and showered honours on him.11 The blame for Macbeth's crime must be laid upon Macbeth alone, for he is tragically free to choose it and must bear the blame for it.

The tragedy of Macbeth's moral choice is that he may alter it, but seems to be powerless to do so. He commented to his wife about his moral condition:

I am in blood Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o' er. (III, iv, 36-38)

He could mean literally that he must commit as many murders to extricate himself from his difficulty as he did to get himself into it. He might also mean that since he has committed himself to a course of evil, he will suffer punishment whether he continues or ceases his murdering. The speech

9Spencer, op. cit., p. 336.  
10Farnham, op. cit., p. 81.  
11Stoll, op. cit., p. 82.
might also be another way of saying, "Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" Although Macbeth is influenced by the emissaries of hell, he freely makes himself a slave to sin. These "instruments of darkness" encourage Macbeth, but he makes his body an instrument of wickedness because he wants to satisfy his pressing ambitions. When a man does not discipline a tendency of this nature, but, as does Macbeth, coddles the inclination, it eventually controls him, although it is normal for the man to control the desire. Macbeth's ambition to develop his powers fully is not in itself sinful; it becomes sinful when he can control it no longer. It is not, then, Shakespeare's purpose to preach religion in Macbeth but to show the results which accrue to a man who fails to discipline his passions.

A man with as strong a conscience as Macbeth's certainly has little control of his emotions when he can so brazenly say that if it were not for his fear of eternity, he would assassinate his sovereign as rapidly as possible, to better serve his lust for power (I, vii, 1-28). Even when he wants to do what he knows is correct and tells his wife, "We will proceed no further in this business," he finds the force of

12Romans 6:16.
evil to be overpowering, not because he cannot resist it, but because he has committed himself to the power of his tumid ambition. "Like Satan, Macbeth is from the first entirely aware of the evil he embraces, and like Satan he can never renounce his free-willed choice, once it has been made."\(^{13}\)

He finds himself existing under the principle uttered by Christ: "Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin."\(^ {14}\)

Shakespeare shows by means of various allusions to Satan the parallel between the arch demon and Macbeth. Both are once good beings who have channeled their great energies toward rebellion rather than toward conformity with a God-created nature. The idea is suggested in several places: Lady Macbeth tells her husband before his murder of Duncan, "Look like the innocent flower,/But be the serpent under't" (I, v, 66-67). Malcolm remarks in reference to Macbeth, "Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell" (IV, iii, 22). Macduff tells Duncan's son a short time later, "Not in the legions/Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd/In evils to top Macbeth" (IV, iii, 5-7). "The most important analogy between Satan and Macbeth is that they are both fully aware they are opposing an ultimately indestructible moral order, so that they enter into crime aware of the inevitability of

\(^{13}\)Ribner, op. cit., p. 149.

\(^{14}\)John 8:34.
their punishment."¹⁵ Macbeth knows immediately after the assassination of Duncan that his hands will never be clean. He defies the repeated warnings of his conscience and of his knowledge "and suffers a series of deprivations, until he has lost what the poorest of men have—that most precious of all—his humanity."¹⁶ Unlike his wife, Macbeth is fully cognizant of the human and divine consequences of his act.

Macbeth's bloody and fearful rule of life has a religious foundation in his attitude toward divine mercy for murderers. The problem is not quite as simple as it appears, however, because Macbeth is a murderer who decides to act so that God cannot offer His mercy. He decides that "here, upon this bank and shoal of time,/We'ld jump the life to come" (I, vii, 6-7). The bell that summons Duncan "to heaven or to hell" is also a bell which summons Macbeth to the second destination he offers for his king. He has volitionally removed himself from the set of conditions required for God's mercy, and he is totally aware of the significance of his actions.

Nevertheless, Macbeth desires the blessing of God on his murder; in fact, he feels that he "had most need of blessing," for the desperateness of his situation has already profoundly impressed him. His "sleep no more" is one of the

¹⁵Pack, op. cit., p. 541.
¹⁶Ibid.
most pitiful utterances in the drama. Glamis has not only murdered his king, but he has also murdered his own sleep, his peace of mind. His condition is succinctly described by Isaiah:

But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt.
There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.  

"It must be remembered, repeated and never forgotten so long as the story is under consideration that the man who descends the stairway has lost, or thinks he has lost, his immortal soul."  

This terrifying thought will haunt him, steal his sleep, and drive him to remove men from his path in an effort to achieve sleep. In Macbeth's case, then, the disruption of his natural means of rest is an indication to him that God will not forgive him. And it is significant that rather than asking for God's cleansing, he calls on Neptune's ocean to wash the blood from his hands, acknowledging even as he does so that his hands would figuratively

The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red.

(II, ii, 63-64)

That Macbeth believes he has ruined his soul is further evidenced by the fact that he believes that he has given it to the enemy of man (III, i, 69). His misery can only be overcome by utter repentance; and although he feels this channel

18 Coles, op. cit., p. 54.
of mercy to be closed by his decision to perpetrate his evil philosophy, it is never closed by God.19

As Macbeth develops his dark philosophy, he remains aware of the freedom of his will. At every major crisis in Macbeth's life there is the possibility that he will heed his conscience and ask for God's mercy. Especially before the murder of Duncan does his conscience vie with the forces of evil, and he wavers until he becomes volitionally committed to the crime. "The dramatist's point here . . . is that a wicked intention must in the end produce wicked action unless it is, not merely revoked by the protagonist's better feelings, but entirely eradicated by his inmost will, aided by divine Grace."20 While he plans the murder of Banquo, he reminds himself that it is he who has "put rancours in the vessel" of his peace. But he does not do so with any intention of reform. In his soliloquy before the murderers enter, he says bitterly that before he will think of allowing the descendants of Banquo to enjoy the fruits of his evil, he will engage fate in combat. Thus, while he rues the loss of his mental tranquillity, he is planning another violation of the law of the "Prince of Peace," and he knows that he is choosing to continue to forfeit his mental peace.

Following the scene with Banquo's ghost, Macbeth tells his wife,

19Elliott, op. cit., p. 113.
20Ibid., p. 23.
Macbeth could mean that his excessive sinning removes all hope of his finding remission for his sins and again practicing righteousness. Christ talked about this problem when He said, "Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."\textsuperscript{21} If it is the business of the Holy Spirit, as it seems to be, to interact with the conscience of a man for God, and if a man refuses to allow this divine agent to deal with his conscience, he obviously cannot hope to receive divine mercy.

Because Macbeth cannot or does not want to return to righteous living, he makes an immediate resolution to put some strange and dire notions into action before his resolution cools. Since divine channels of help seem to be closed, he resorts to the agents of the enemy of his soul. This is a significant step in the deterioration of his moral character; for although he does not destroy his free choice by depending on the advice of evil ministers, he greatly lessens his chance of reconciliation with God. Macbeth's reliance on the advice of the witches results in both his mortal and his moral death, for he dies cursing the man who is fated to take his life.

Not long before his death Macbeth reflects seriously on his "way of life." Full of remorse, he decides that his leaf

\textsuperscript{21}Matthew 12:32.
has turned yellow and is about ready to fall. He has none of the social esteem a man ought to have near the end of his life; and, most significant to this discussion, he is certain that he is not an object of the love of God. When he hears that Lady Macbeth has died and comments, "She should have died hereafter," the last word of this statement frightens him. "There would have been a time for such a word," he says, and he remorsefully continues,

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
(V, v, 17-23)

His tomorrows continue to offer him a chance to mend his moral system, but every tomorrow brings only the memory of the failure of yesterday and a new encouragement for a fool to continue to practice his philosophy of death. His hour has come and almost gone with nothing constructive to show for its passage. This speech, coming as it does at a time when Macbeth is either unwilling or unable to repent, marks for this usurper the deepest tragedy. Macbeth knows that he has traded his eternal soul for the treasure of time—the kingship. But now he realizes what an infinitely bad bargain he has made. He has bartered eternity for a tiny candle which has been able to produce no more than a shadow.22

The way of the transgressor has been hard for Macbeth, but his extraordinary courage carries him past this crisis of bitter regret, past the discovery of the witches' deception, and past his momentary hesitation before Macduff to his final,

Lay on, Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries 'Hold, enough!'
(V, viii, 33-34)

His consistently negative attitude toward God and positive affinity to a life of death end with the same violence and sound and fury which have tempered his existence. Although Macbeth hoped to live a life worthy of praise, he included in it incompatible elements which caused him increasing misery until he actually destroyed himself.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

It may seem unnecessary to conclude that Macbeth possesses a conscience, since one of the chief themes of the drama traces the deterioration of this unusual man's moral life. But one could judge a man like Macbeth, who murders his king, his friends and their families, and innocent bystanders, to be so vile that he could not by the merest chance have any moral or religious scruples. It is not Shakespeare's primary purpose in Macbeth, however, to tell the story of another amoral scoundrel. Macbeth's criminal acts are necessary if the poet is to perpetrate one of his purposes in the drama--to describe the reaction of a gifted man who possesses a powerful conscience to a life spent in crime. When the mental life of this Scottish king is scrutinized carefully, the critic must come to the conclusion that Macbeth's life as a social being is powerfully affected by a deep-rooted conscience. There are a number of factors which support this conclusion.

In the first place Macbeth is originally a man of integrity who is trusted and loved by his associates. More than one individual testifies to the character traits which make Macbeth a genuinely upright member of the Scottish nobility.
Before his career of crime commences, Macbeth lists his moral and spiritual objections to Duncan's murder which occur to his sensitive mind. Although he has an almost uncontrollable desire to enjoy the power of the kingship, the thought of gaining this authority by assassinating Duncan horrifies him. He has not experienced the superhuman strength of evil, but he has spiritual insight enough to suspect that he will become involved in a force too potent for him to control if he gives himself to a life of sin. Furthermore, he fears that his association with evil will cause him to suffer after death. When he does link himself with wickedness, he suffers painful remorse which keeps him in a state of constant mental torment. The terrifying images which Macbeth's remarkable imagination reveals to him are unquestionably the result of his disturbed conscience.

One result of Macbeth's highly impressionable and responsive conscience is his persistent effort to eliminate from his presence men whose piety, in contrast to his villainy, causes him mental vexation. It is not normal for a man to continue to commit crimes which cause him severe spiritual pain, especially when the crimes include the murders of his close friends and loyal subjects. But Macbeth repeatedly arranges for the murder of his subjects in an effort to silence the voice of his conscience. He could achieve the same purpose by repenting, but neither his pride nor his ambition will allow him to do anything which will involve
the surrender of his royal authority. Although he does not abide by the dictates of his conscience following the murder of Duncan, it is an indirect cause of his crime. His spiritual hopelessness, created by his attitude toward repentance, causes him to plunge on into crime in an effort to silence his sensitive conscience. That it is strong and insistent and that Macbeth is never able to reduce the volume of its persevering voice are evidences of the reality of its presence and the deepness of its roots.

Probably the most obvious result of Macbeth's effort to reduce the power of his conscience through crime is the decadence into which his soul sinks. His crimes are the overt signs of his moral corruption, but even more significant is his voluntary association with the witches. When he resorts to them for counsel, he is truly making himself a child of hell. He shows by his attitude toward them that he is not satisfied with his own efforts to stop the insistent urging of his conscience and that he wants the aid of their supernatural, evil powers. To his chagrin, however, he discovers that the weird sisters give him equivocal advice; for when he follows it, his mental and spiritual pain is only intensified. The most excruciating and merciless form of this inner suffering is the intense fear which Macbeth constantly experiences. This fear occurs under several guises, but Macbeth's is basically a fear of evil. His conscience has been taught to dread evil, and though he tries to
recompense himself for his evil by committing more and more violence until he appears to have baptized himself in blood, he never succeeds in shaking off this consequence of disobeying his conscience.

Perhaps the most tragic feature of Macbeth's iniquitous life is that he voluntarily initiates and perpetuates it. At every major crisis in Macbeth's career, Shakespeare emphasizes the idea that his protagonist has the opportunity to repent and change his method of living. Although several forces tempt him to commit evil, his conscience never leaves him at their mercy. It continues to warn him of the effects of evil and to remind him that he is not being compelled to practice sin. Macbeth's religious training tells him that God would grant him mercy if he would pray for it, but he refuses to repent. His criminal activity has not weakened his conscience, as he hoped it would, but it has strengthened his pride so that he is unable to reconcile himself to the humility required for true contrition. It is the terrible spectacle of an avoidable triumph of evil over good in the human soul that constitutes the real tragedy in Macbeth.
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